

Beginning the Dialogue: Talking about Literature in the Teaching of Multicultural Education

Jennifer Dyer Sennette
Texas A&M University-Commerce

Tamara Pizzoli
The English Schoolhouse

Tami Morton
Texas A&M University-Commerce

ABSTRACT

In higher education, multicultural education courses are often required in teacher education programs. Instructors feel a great deal of responsibility to effectively expose students to relevant issues regarding the increasingly diverse society in which we live. In this study, the instructors incorporate book discussion groups within their multicultural education course. Based on the needs evidenced by students' verbal and written commentary, the instructors identified meaningful texts that provided pedagogical strategies, allowed opportunity for students to examine their past education and family history, as well as fully described the classroom settings in which educators teach. With the increased involvement of students in the selection of meaningful texts used to guide book discussion groups, the instructors found that a greater level of connection, clarity, and understanding regarding varying cultures and diverse learners was realized by all.

For many years, adults have congregated in their homes, libraries, church basements, and various social settings to talk about books they have enjoyed reading.

Educators have realized the value of these great conversations, and have incorporated them into the classroom since the 1980s (Daniels, 2006). As a result, book clubs have been used as an interactive way for adults in graduate courses to hear various perspectives, opinions and thoughts that were not familiar (Beach and Yussen, 2011). The use of literature offers an engaging way to discuss topics people find difficult to talk about on their own.

Context of the Story

Jennifer and Tamera were the instructor and teaching assistant of a graduate course on multicultural education during the 2011 spring semester. One of the most informative course requirements implemented during the semester that enabled this learning was that of book discussion groups. Book discussion groups provided an opportunity for students to read, reflect, and then communicate their responses to literature. Through the book discussion groups, students heard various perspectives on topics relevant to multicultural education. The authors wanted to determine if the book discussion

groups were an effective practice to use in a graduate course to encourage critical discourse.

A great deal of responsibility was felt to effectively expose students to relevant issues regarding the increasingly diverse society that we live in while allowing opportunities for debate, processing, reflection, and reconstruction of beliefs and practices to occur. Though students enrolled in the course were from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, few had previously taken the required course on multicultural education. Many who had previously completed a course on the subject stated that past courses focused mostly on issues concerning race, particularly strife and struggle between Blacks and Whites.

Book Discussion Groups

Research has indicated that when adult learners talk about literature in a student-directed experience, deeper understanding of the text is evident (Addington, 2001; Beach and Yussen, 2011; Smith, 1996). Furthermore, it is also realized that the book discussion groups situated in the study are essentially the same as adult book clubs. Similar to the book clubs described by Addington (2001) who looked at book clubs in a graduate university English course, the book discussion groups in this study were student-led, not instructor-driven.

Theoretical Framework

The book discussion groups were created with the understanding of how readers make meaning from text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Rosenblatt explained that each reading experience is a transaction between the

reader and the text. As each reader is unique based on his or her personal background knowledge and experiences, they respond to texts based on what he or she brings to the reading. Rosenblatt (1978) explained that readers will have a response that is either aesthetic or efferent. An aesthetic response is emotion filled, while an efferent response is one that recognizes that information is gathered. With this theoretical framework in mind, the authors designed this study to determine how the book discussion groups provided graduate university students the opportunity to make meaning from texts and respond to texts featuring diverse people and cultures.

Developing a Shared Understanding

On the first evening of class, each graduate student was asked to define “multicultural education.” Once shared, the definitions proved to be both varied and surprising. Despite living in a border state and being exposed to a variety of different cultures on a daily basis, a surprisingly great deal of graduate student educators enrolled in the course did not seem to understand the importance of recognizing both race and culture. Through comments made either in class or in weekly reflective journals, it became evident that some educators believed that because they were instructing a class of diverse children, and they genuinely cared about the academic and social growth of each child, they did not hold any personal prejudices or biases that required examination or thought. Dovidio, Kawakami, and Gaertner (2000) refer to this phenomenon as “aversive racism,” a term that describes when individuals hold unacknowledged negative views toward or feelings about minority groups but ensure

that these underlying feelings are never manifested in their behavior because they truly view themselves as non-prejudiced people. Evidence of this type of thinking can be found in statements that were often heard during class, such as "I just don't see color," or "In my class, we are all the same. There are no differences." Though these statements appear to be made with the best intentions, the devastating effects that this reasoning may have on students and educators alike is often not realized (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

Several educational researchers, such as Banks (1984), Baratz and Baratz (1970), and Ladson-Billings (1990) agree that failing to acknowledge that differences exist and are visible in the learning environment is a negative occurrence, and can even be regarded as a covert form of racism, in which important, individual differences and diversities do exist, but the educator fails to recognize them as valid or worth noting. A few students in the multicultural education course realized the importance of acknowledging differences in race and culture, but admitted to only doing so within a specific race or culture's federally designated month. Louise Derman-Sparks (1993) coined the term "tourist-multiculturalism" to describe this type of approach to diversity—one that merely visits a particular culture, creating an artificial exposure to varied cultures.

As today's schools represent a microcosm of society, each is becoming an increasingly dynamic and diverse environment while in many areas the teaching profession continues to be dominated by White, middle class females (Landsman, 2001). It is imperative that educators not only examine their beliefs and thoughts about

multicultural issues, but also seriously consider what implications these beliefs or even biases may have on classroom instruction and dynamics. Biases may be evidenced in the way educators treat or address certain children, ways in which they interact with others, or materials they utilize or omit (Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, and Gaertner 1996; Rothbart , 1996). Additionally, adults serve as role models after whom children often base their creeds, ideas, and practices (Trager & Yarrow, 1952). Therefore, allowing students to both witness and engage in critical thinking and discussion about a variety of cultures and diversities conveys the belief that it is optimal to have varying cultures, ideas, and beliefs. Further, with this exposure, children may better understand that the ultimate goal is always to gain increased understanding and to improve as an individual while maintaining an appreciation and respect for the various cultures and differences of others.

The Study of Book Discussion Groups

Instead of assigning each graduate student to a specific culture, group, or area, the instructor and teaching assistant opted to list the student-developed sub-areas of multicultural education on the board in front of the class. Students were able to choose which category they wanted their book for weekly discussion groups to pertain to from the following collapsed choices: African Americans, Asians, Caucasians, Latinos, Middle Eastern, Native Americans, race in general, gays and lesbians, gender issues, mental disorders, physical disabilities, language, poverty, interracial relationships, and religion. Though not given a particular limit for how many individuals could be in each group,

students were encouraged to not only disperse themselves among the categories, but to also choose a culture or group with which they were not already greatly familiar.

Selecting Meaningful Texts

Of the thirteen possible multicultural categories, only five areas were chosen by each of the students: race in general, African Americans, poverty, Latinos, and Caucasians. Only one of the selected groups was not explicitly related to a racial or ethnic group. The number of students electing "Caucasian" was so great; two groups had to be created for this subculture.

Based on the needs evidenced by students' verbal and written commentary, the instructor and teaching assistant identified three objectives to meet with each book selection: 1) to provide pedagogical strategies that assist teacher educators/trainers to begin the dialogue about the importance of seeing race and culture and using them to increase their knowledge about their own students in an effort to more effectively reach them; 2) to assist teachers in examining their past education and family histories and how they affect and/or drive instruction through the reading of selected texts; 3) to select appropriate and meaningful texts for book discussion groups that mirror the classroom settings in which educators teach.

Based on the objectives outlined by the instructor and teaching assistant, the following books were chosen to facilitate book group discussion: *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* by Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The*

Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America by Jonathan Kozol, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S. Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* by Angela Valenzuela, *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging Our Children Our Schools* by Deborah Meier and George Wood, *White Teacher* by Vivian Paley and *A White Teacher Talks about Race* by Julie Landsman. A rationale is provided for each book choice in the appendix.

Meetings and Discussion

Once formed, each book discussion group decided at what pace the assigned book would be read. Books could be divided into sections or chapters. As a connection activity to be completed for each section read, students were asked to write a gem (a quote from the text that was very meaningful to them), a reaction to that gem, and an action that they could take based on that gem on a 3 ½" x 5" note card. The last thirty minutes of each class meeting served as designated book group discussion time, and students used their note cards with their gems, reactions, and actions to guide discussion. To ensure that the entire class benefited from the new learning taking place in each individual book group, a representative from each group shared a brief synopsis of what their particular group discussed with the whole class weekly.

To synthesize the new insights and knowledge gained from the book group readings and discussions, each book group gave a presentation on their respective books. Presentations were held during the last two meetings of the course, and could be presented in whatever format the group decided was appropriate and effective.

Methods of presentation included power point presentations, scrapbooks, poster presentations, and oral presentations. Though the format of sharing varied, an overwhelming amount of learning that took place in each book discussion group was clearly evident. A few quotes heard during the varied presentations included, "I now see why I need to see color," and "I've learned so much through this book and being able to discuss with my colleagues...I'm going to suggest having book discussion groups at my school to my principal." Perhaps one student summarized the overall sentiment of the class best when she stated, "Multicultural education truly is education for all. It does not discriminate or exclude. I know that now as a result of this course and this group."

Implications of the study

Through the utilization of book discussion groups, graduate students in this multicultural education course were exposed to various issues often involved in the effective teaching of diverse learners, were able to reflect upon their own

teaching beliefs and practices, and revise those that were not providing optimal opportunities for growth and success for all students in the classroom environment. Book discussion groups will continue to serve as an integral component of the existing syllabus for the multicultural course provided at the university; however, the authors realize that one component that would be beneficial is allowing students to select their own books based on their backgrounds and interests and considering suggestions for relevant texts that students may have previously encountered. When graduate students are allowed to have their own choice in selecting books, research has found that the students were more engaged and motivated to participate (Beach and Youssein, 2011; Daniels, 2006). With the increased involvement of students in the selection of meaningful texts used to guide book discussion groups, it is the hoped that there is a greater level of connection, clarity, and understanding regarding varying cultures and diverse learners may be realized by all future graduate students enrolled in the coursework.

References

- Addington, A. H. (2001). Talking about literature in university book club and seminar settings. *Research in Teaching of English*, 36(2), 212-248.
- Banks, J. (1984). Values, ethnicity, social science research, and educational policy. In B. Ladner (Ed.), *The humanities in precollegiate education: 83rd yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, (pp. 91-111). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Baratz, S. S., & Baratz, J. C. (1970). Early childhood intervention: The social science base of institutional racism. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40(1), 29-47.
- Beach, R. & Yussen, S. (2011). Practices of productive adult book clubs. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55 (2), 121-131.
- Daniels, H. (2006). What's the next big thing with literature circles? *Voices in the Middle*, 13 (4), 10-15.

Derman-Sparks, L. (1993). Revisiting multicultural education: What children need to live in a diverse society. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 22(1), 6-10.

Dovidio, J. F., Brigham, J. C., Johnson, B. T., & Gaertner, S. (1996). Stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination: Another look. In C. N. Macrae, C. Stangor, & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *Stereotypes and stereotyping* (pp. 276-319). New York, NY: Guilford.

Dovidio, J. F., Kawakami, K., & Gaertner, S. L. (2000). Reducing contemporary prejudice: Combating explicit and implicit bias at the individual and intergroup level. In S. Oskamp (Ed.), *Reducing prejudice and discrimination* (pp. 137-163). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Gaertner, S. L., & Dovidio, J. F. (1986). The aversive form of racism. In J. F. Dovidio & S. L. Gaertner (Eds.), *Prejudice, discrimination, and racism* (pp. 61-90). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: Restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1990). Culturally relevant teaching: Effective instruction for black students. *The College Board Review*, 155, 20-25.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Landsman, J. (2001). *A white teacher talks about race*. Indianapolis, IN: Scarecrow Education.

Paley, V. G. (1979). *White teacher*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Rothbart, M. (1996). Category-exemplar dynamics and stereotype change. In Y. Amir & J. Schwarzwald (Eds.), [Special Issue], *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 20 (3-4), 305-321.

Smith, M. W. (1996). Conversations about literature outside classrooms: How adults talk about books in their book clubs. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 40 (3), 180-186.

Trager, H. G., & Yarrow, M. R. (1952). *They learn what they live: Prejudice in young children*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S. Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Appendix

The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America by Jonathan Kozol (2005). Kozol takes a critical, honest, and effective survey of many disturbing trends that are occurring in America's increasingly inequitable school systems.

The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994). Through personal reflection and accounts of other effective teachers' practices, the author details approaches and strategies that, if properly implemented, may help African American children achieve greater success in the school environment.

Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging Our Children and Our Schools by Deborah Meier and George Wood (2004). The No Child Left Behind Act has undoubtedly changed the ways in which teachers, districts, and individual states instruct and assess students. This work highlights some of the most profound changes that have occurred as a result of the legislation, and more importantly details what affect these changes are having on America's students and their learning.

White Teacher by Vivian Paley (1979). A White teacher details the understandings she gained from her teaching experience and is able to effectively examine the privilege and promise that is unfairly afforded to White children. *White Teacher* is not written to provide insights on how to effectively instruct the Caucasian population, but is written from the perspective of a Caucasian woman, which allows the reader to either identify with or gain insights from this perspective.

A White Teacher Talks about Race by Julie Landsman (2001). A Caucasian teacher attempting to cope with personal bias and prejudice toward certain minority groups as a result of a horrific experience she endured earlier in her life finds healing and hope in her experiences as a teacher of diverse children. Like the work *White Teacher*, *A White Teacher Talks about Race* is not a book meant to provide insights into the lives of White children, but is effectively written from the perspective of a White educator in order to give the reader an accurate perspective of what it is like to teach diverse learners as a Caucasian individual.

Subtractive Schooling: U.S. Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring by Angela Valenzuela (1999). Living in a border state, this book provides insights into the struggles and complications that Mexican-American youth face in today's school environments.